

Georgia Institute of Technology
HEALTH SYSTEMS INSTITUTE

Introduction to Healthcare Processes in the Hospital

Guide for Observation and Field notes

For two weeks, you will be observing nurses, physicians, and their healthcare team members on medical-surgical units and at least 1 specialty unit for a total of 15 hours. A major goal of these observations is to see first-hand the work of health care professionals in the hospital and more specifically, to understand how major processes like care coordination, monitoring, medication administration, patient education, pain management, shift hand-offs, patient transfers, are carried out – and the factors that affect how they are carried out.

Prior to beginning your observations:

1. Review the guidelines for your written analysis of your clinical observations (in the course syllabus)
2. Refine your plan for your observation that you described in Think Paper #2. Be clear on what you want to focus on – activities and processes – and how you will capture this information for your analysis.

I. Observing in the Hospital Setting

- Observation will be your major method or tool for collecting information about healthcare processes and activities. There may be opportunity for talking with the people you're observing, but conversations typically will be short and will happen as you're walking somewhere (usually quickly) with someone.
- Observing people in their usual activities is hard work. Expect to be tired after your first few observations. There will be a lot going on around you. People will be interested in the “stranger” on their unit and you may have to explain why you're there a few times.

1. Observing – in general

- Observing entails shadowing people, watching and listening to interactions – capturing the who, what, when, where, why of activities.
- Observation and the interpretation of your observations are different activities that require different types of note-writing. It is important to distinguish between what you are seeing, hearing, smelling, etc and your interpretation of the meaning of these events.

While observation and interpretation both play an important role in understanding activities and processes going on around you, you need to be clear about when and why you use these different sources of information in order to get an accurate picture of the processes you choose to focus on.

2. Being Unobtrusive

- You want the people you're observing to do their "usual thing" as if you weren't observing them. When you first start observing people on the unit, they will likely be very aware of you. Over time, they'll go about their usual activities as if you weren't there.
- You may need to orient the people you observe to your role as an observer. It's ok to share with them something like, "I'm a student in engineering and interested in learning about the work you do every day. I'd like to follow you around as you do the things you usually do." You can also tell them that you occasionally may ask them to "think out loud" so you can understand what they're doing or why. Otherwise, you will be shadowing them and jotting down notes.
- It will be natural for the people you observe to want to involve you in their activities and to talk with you as they go through their activities. Keep remembering, you're there in the role of observer – listen to their comments, but try not to engage in ongoing conversation. You should be talking or asking questions only when it is essential to your understanding an event that is central to the processes you have chosen to focus in on. Before you start asking questions, take some time to observe the activities a few times and see if you can figure out what's happening – and check it out with subsequent observations.
- There may be times that you want to offer your assistance with something the person you're observing is doing. **You are there as observer only – and it is important that you do not assist in any direct patient care – or do anything related to patient care. There are serious liability issues associated with this. If you are asked to help, politely explain that you are there as an observer only and your faculty have told you that you may not assist them even though you'd like to.**

3. Requesting permission to observe other staff, or patients/families

- **Before you start observing someone**, take a few minutes to go over the plan for the observation. Talk about how this person will let you know if there are situations they do not wish for you to observe, how they wish to approach patients about having you present during their interaction, what you should do, where you should stand if an emergency situation happens, etc.
- For courtesy, when the person you're observing interacts with another staff member, ask that he/she briefly introduces you and let's them know why you're there. When the person you're observing enters a patient room or cubicle (as in the ER), request that they ask the patient if it is ok if you observe.
- If a staff member or patient does not grant you permission to observe – or seems uncomfortable having you present (this won't happen often, but it may happen – especially if a procedure is going on, if a patient is in pain, etc), tell them, "that's

fine” and leave the encounter or room. You can stand a distance away or wait outside the room until the person you’re observing is available again.

- If someone refuses to have you observe, don’t try to persuade them to allow you to continue. It’s each person’s right to be observed or not without any explanation or justification.
- If you are observing a team or group meeting, inform the group of your request to observe – typically, the person you’re with for that time will provide the explanation for you.

4. Adhering to HIPAA

- All patient information is to be treated with respect and held confidential. Information is shared only when there is a need to share it for patient care.
- Do not write down any staff or patient names in your field notes – you can give each person a pseudonym if you wish. Similarly, do not write down any information or combination of information that would allow someone to specifically identify this individual – e.g. combination of age, gender, diagnosis, physical characteristics....
- Be careful about talking about specific patients (or staff) with the person you’re observing in public places – halls, elevators etc. Talk only in general terms – and do not name patients or staff.

5. When to ask questions of someone you’re observing – or not

- The decision to ask questions while observing is an important one. In general, you want to talk to and ask questions only when they’re important to understanding what you’re observing. Many times, it’s helpful to watch an event several times before you ask questions about it.
- Typical reasons to ask questions:
 - To identify the roles of people in exchanges you’re observing – if their role is not clear from their comments, their name tag or other possible identifying sources.
 - To identify what a person is doing and why – if it’s not obvious to you after watching for the same activity a few times.
- Don’t ask questions:
 - For conversation only
 - If the activity and intent may be figured out with further observation
 - **In emergency situations** – if you happen to be in a situation where a patient suddenly needs emergency care, staff members will need to focus on the patient and likely will need to move quickly. Try to remove yourself from the center of activity as quietly and quickly as you can (e.g. if you’re in a patient room, move away from the patient’s bed and either exit the room (unless you’ll block or get in the way of others from coming in) or move to a corner of the room as far as you can get from the hub of activity. It’s a good thing to talk briefly with the person you’re observing

at the start of your observation and ask: what should I do if an emergency situation happens while I'm observing you.

- If the person is moving quickly and seems very busy

II. Field Notes

Your field notes are your “data” for your analysis and for preparing your paper.

Some important things to keep in mind as you think about writing field notes to capture your observation experiences:

- Decide on your strategy for field notes before you start observing. Even better, try observing something in your usual day for 30 minutes or so and try doing field notes.
- You'll see a lot in 3 hours – unless you have an extraordinary memory, I wouldn't rely on memory to capture what happened. In my experience, this tends to result in short and general comments filled with a lot of interpretation – you tend to fill in the actual events with your perceptions of them rather than what actually happened. Or – your notes become a superficial listing of what you did – e.g. went into 6 patient rooms – also not terribly useful for analysis.

1. Field notes – in general

- Complete, accurate, and timely field notes will make writing your paper much easier and more useful to you.
- Field notes are a method to document observations. They include the who, what, when, where, and possibly why of the events you observe. Field notes are not your interpretation of the events. They should include only what you have seen, heard, smelled and not your personal “spin” on these things.
- What you observe and hear will most likely stimulate lots of thinking on your part. It is important that your field notes document as clearly as possible what you have actually seen, heard etc – not what you think about it. You can use a separate place, e.g. an interpretation log or memo to help you process your reactions or thoughts about the meaning of your observations.
- In order to have as complete field notes as possible, you might want to keep a notepad with you while observing. Write down key words to jog your memory about what you have observed. Try to select words that bring the scene back to you and allow you to capture it completely and accurately.
- Write your field notes as soon after your observation as possible. The longer you wait, the more you will forget and more likely you are to include your own interpretations rather than the actual events.

2. Field Note format (see the example I handed out in class)

- **Recommended: Prepare a separate field note for each observation**
- Label each field note with the date, start time for observation, end time for observation, location (hospital, unit), and role of person(s) you observed
- Body of the Field Note.
Your field notes should include the following information in narrative format:
 - Who was observed
 - When the observation occurred
 - Where the observation occurred
 - What happened

Describe what happened; do not interpret the meaning of what happened.
Try to capture the language used in the event – especially short quotes from the interaction that you think are particularly illustrative of “what” is happening. Capture as much detail as you can (without any specific staff, patient names or identifying information).
- At the end of your field note, you can add an “interpretation section” if you wish – this is a good place to reflect on what you thought about what you observed, to jot down your insights, your questions, or things you might want to watch more closely during your next observation.

Questions???